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“Sunk in the Cornfield with His Family”: Sense of Place in O’Connor’s “The Displaced Person”

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT the sense of place which plays such an important role in Southern fiction, as in Southern life. Flannery O’Connor’s work has not often been considered in the light of *place*, but when it has, it has been discussed in the way we might treat, for example, Faulkner’s work. The conclusion is drawn that Miss O’Connor’s work is pervaded with a sense of place, that her work profited immensely from her rootedness in place.¹ With such conclusions I have no essential quarrel, insofar as they do not imply that O’Connor shares what we may call the implicit values generally perceived as flowing from this typically Southern topophilia.

Outside of the fiction, in her letters and essays, she had little to say about “sense of place.” In *Mystery and Manners* she suggests the dangers of the kind of *placeily* writing which is all quaintness and local color: “The woods are full of regional writers, and it is the great horror of every serious Southern writer that he will become one of them.”² Other than such observations, her reflections on place lead invariably to her concern with what she calls the writer’s “true country, which the writer with Christian convictions will consider to be what is eternal and absolute” (p. 27). For her, the writer’s “true country” is the “peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity

¹ See, for example, C. Hugh Holman, *The Roots of Southern Writing* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), pp. 181-183, and John F. Desmond, “Flannery O’Connor’s Sense of Place,” *Southern Humanities Review*, 10 (Summer 1976), 251-259.

² *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), pp. 28-35. All further references to this work are indicated in the text.

somehow meet" (p. 59). These concerns are obvious throughout her fiction. What has not been remarked, however, is the displacement, the radical divestiture and deracination which necessarily precede entry into the "true country." This proposition is implicit in other stories (such as "Judgement Day") but it receives its most effective dramatization in O'Connor's masterpiece, "The Displaced Person."

Here is the beginning of "The Displaced Person":

The peacock was following Mrs. Shortley up the road to the hill where she meant to stand. Moving one behind the other, they looked like a complete procession. Her arms were folded and as she mounted the prominence, she might have been the giant wife of the countryside, come out at some sign of danger to see what the trouble was. She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain, and rose, up narrowing bulges of granite, to two icy blue points of light that pierced forward, surveying everything.⁸

The charged language, the loaded imagery, of this passage sets up a number of expectations concerning Mrs. Shortley which are radically undercut in the ensuing pages of the story. To clarify what I mean by this, allow me to cite an experiment I conducted recently in a Southern Renaissance seminar in which the students had read a great deal of Southern literature, but no O'Connor. I asked them to comment on this passage, on the image of Mrs. Shortley presented in these lines. They made various observations, but there was remarkable agreement on two scores: she appeared to be an earth-mother figure, of the earth earthy, an autochthon in the root sense—one sprung from the land itself; and, because of this identity, the "giant wife of the countryside" was taken by all of the respondents to be a positive, exemplary character who would somehow illuminate all the meanings and resonances of the story. Deeply imbued with the flavor of other Southern writers, they were doing the best they could with the material at hand. They were quite accurate in sensing her power and importance, but utterly wrong, of course, in assuming her to be a positive, exemplary figure. Later, when they read the rest of the story, all of these students were shocked at how wrong they had been; they had learned, I

⁸ *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 194. All further references to this volume are indicated in the text.

believe, a salutary lesson about narrative strategy and in the process they had confirmed my hunch that one of the deepest thrusts of the tale is a radical redefinition of place and its function in the human condition.

Yet perhaps we should not assume that every reader of this marvelous, intricately patterned story sees the same patterns of grace unfolding. It has been seen, for example, as the story of an efficient, mechanical displaced person who intrudes upon and disrupts the order of a Southern farm, one of the cardinal sins in an Agrarian vision of experience. C. Hugh Holman observes that, in an Agrarian context, "The 'displaced person' may be taken as a symbol of the mechanical world intruding itself from the outside" and thus, effectively, committing a sin against place. Having said this, however, he immediately declares that we should find such a reading "suspicious."⁴ Indeed, more than suspicious, for it is, as the text of the tale makes amply evident, a perverse reading of the story. But there are, as I have already suggested, confusing, contradictory, or—to be precise—paradoxical signals relayed in this story, particularly in the opening passages. It is necessary to insist, however, that O'Connor has all of these signals very much in hand, that the artistic control is total, that it is the reader who must work a bit harder to grasp the startling collocations of the story.

To stay with the first paragraph, where O'Connor's design has generally been overlooked, there are questions that must be asked. Why is Mrs. Shortley—who is clearly in the ultimate context an exemplar of blindness, narrowness, ignorance and sloth, one of O'Connor's most memorable false prophets or anti-Christians—why is she associated in the opening image with a peacock, the two of them moving down the road "like a complete procession"? Most readers of O'Connor know that the peacock is a traditional Christian symbol, as Carter Martin writes, "a tradi-

⁴ Holman, p. 182. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., also suggests this reading, e. g., in *The Faraway Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), p. 238, where he says that the displaced person "has irretrievably disrupted the customary patterns of Southern rural society." This is true, but the lesson to be drawn from it is hardly an Agrarian one; rather, it is meant to be seen as a positive "disruption," a radical dislocation that might prepare the rooted, place-proud farmers for the onset of grace, for the recognition of the "true country."

tional symbol of Christ, specifically associated with Holy Communion."⁵ Indeed, even if one did not know this, the text and action of the story reveal it. Why, then, is the peacock associated with Mrs. Shortley at the beginning? Exercising a willing suspension of iconographical stimulus-reaction, we might say that the strutting, proud, vaingloriousness of Mrs. Shortley is emblematised by the peacock in this passage. For surely peacockery, stripped of its Christian associations, is one aspect of Mrs. Shortley. Or we might ask: Is this not the peacock in his Eastern, his Mohammedan avatar, as the bird who opened the gate of paradise to admit the devil?

To Paradise, the Arabs say,
Satan could never find the way
Until the peacock let him in . . .⁶

This version of peacock symbolism is apparently more universal than the Christian version. Does it make sense here? Yes, and a great deal more sense than the linking of Mrs. Shortley with Christ in procession. For in this opening scene she and the peacock are on the road watching "a black car turn through the gate," out of which emerge the priest and the displaced person, both of whom are regarded by Mrs. Shortley as manifestations of the devil. That this is not truly so, that the story goes on to reveal her erroneous vision, simply underscores the design, the effective strategy of inversion which controls this opening scene and gives the story its deep form. For as we come to see, it is Mrs. Shortley who is at one with the devil, not the displaced person, and she is at the gate with the peacock in this scene.⁷

⁵ Carter W. Martin, *The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), p. 139.

⁶ See, for this version of the proverb, *Encyclopedia of Superstition, Folklore and the Occult Sciences* (Chicago, 1903), p. 675. This peacock symbolism may be found in many forms in Middle Eastern as well as Oriental folklore.

⁷ O'Connor is surely entitled—if not obliged—to employ the peacock as a variable and inclusive symbol, to bring into play its numerous traditional properties and to subsume them under the ultimate—for her—iconographical significance. This is exactly what she does here. For example, there is a widespread western belief that peacock feathers bring bad luck, and a very familiar superstition that bringing a peacock's feather into a theater means disaster for the play, the cast, or the theater. Surely O'Connor would have discovered this, heard this somewhere, given her knowledge of peacocks; but the reader of "The Displaced Person" would probably say that she chooses to ignore this belief,

The same strategy dictates the earth-mother associations which cluster about her. It is not enough to notice them and then go on to say that they turn out to be misperceptions. That is to miss entirely O'Connor's point: that Mrs. Shortley is indeed the "giant wife of the countryside," that she is truly the natural, autochthonous expression of her place. This point is made in more than one way. We all know O'Connor's propensity to play with names, to type and to define characters through their names. What does Shortley mean? At first glance, we might consider size, stature, but since she towers "with the grand self-confidence of a mountain," we discard that reading. We might then think of one who behaves curtly, who judges abruptly, and there may be a certain vague appropriateness to the name here. But the problem is just that it is so vague, and we are not accustomed to vagueness in O'Connor's world, where all the meanings are sharply etched. Moreover, if she was after such an association, why did she spell it l-e-y? So we ask what about Short-ley, ley as a variant form of lea, or meadow? But sense is frustrated here, too, unless we consider the name an ironic appellation, since *ley* in its root sense means "place where the light shines." It is a striking characteristic of Mrs. Shortley that she is indifferent to the light, that there is no light in her heart. Short of light? Perhaps, but I think there is a better answer to her name, one that does not require so much knowledge of variant forms and etymology. That is, *leys*, or *ley-lines*, the ostensible lines of force present in the earth which are sometimes used to explicate the mysteries of place, of ancient roads and mysterious mounds and earthworks, of the arrangement of dolmens and menhirs and standing stones. I am not able to demonstrate that Miss O'Connor had any knowledge of Celtic lore but such knowledge would account for the naming of Mrs. Shortley, with the "ley" spelling. Reconsider this passage in this light:

She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain, and rose, up narrowing bulges of granite

Granite, indeed. A curious image, this, but not for the earth mother, the living dolmen or menhir, the great standing stone that O'Connor wishes to evoke here. The *leys*, then, the lines of force emanating from her or with which she is in harmony, are, as her name suggests, short *leys*; they do not go far, they do not

suffice, they do not, certainly, carry one to the true country. If O'Connor was aware of this, then she would have been aware of its role in various druidical earth-cults. She might here have in mind the so-called Helioarkite religion, whose followers were said to be worshippers of the sun and of Noah's Ark.⁸ When Mrs. Shortley has her vision not long before her death, the "sky folded back . . . and a gigantic figure stood facing her. It was the color of the sun . . ." (p. 210). As her vision continues, the sky seems to be filled with white fish swimming in one direction and "pieces of the sun . . . being washed in the opposite direction." Thus Christ—Ichthus—moves, leads in one direction, and the sun moves, leads in the opposite direction. For Mrs. Shortley, the vocation of prophet seems to mean, primarily, the stream of mad, vehement anti-Catholic raving which provides a major motif of the story. It is not incidental, then, to note that a feature of druidical cult-worship (such as that of the eighteenth-century antiquarian William Stukeley) was frenzied anti-Catholic raving. It is no surprise either, given all this, to read that when Mrs. Shortley leaves the farm, just before her death, O'Connor describes the car moving slowly away "like some *overfreighted leaking ark*" (pp. 212-213; emphasis added). Indeed, within the context sketched in here, the druidical helioarkite raving and false worship, the pantheistic notions of ley lines, all the elements of Mrs. Shortley's characterization, from the opening image of the story to her departure from the tale, fall rather neatly into place.

Be that as it may, even if O'Connor did not have any of

since the only person who gathers peacock feathers in the story is the priest and he is obviously not a victim of bad luck, a candidate for disaster, nor does he have anything to do with the theater. But that reader should look again. The priest gathers the feathers "like a bouquet" (p. 209). In the next paragraph, Mrs. Shortley's vision occurs when "the sky folded back in two pieces like the curtain to a stage" (p. 210). It is her final vision, and this is a most curious image to employ here, unless the old superstition is remembered. The disaster in the theater, the bad luck, is ultimate: shortly thereafter, she is dead. Again the reader protests: she was not the one who picked up the feather. Yes, but she is the pagan to whom the old superstition would apply; the priest, living under the new post-pagan dispensation, garners the ultimate iconographical effect of the feather, a thoroughly Christian composite of beauty and grace. This is what I mean by the inclusiveness of the symbol, its subsumptive properties.

⁸ See *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained* (New York, 1974), pp. 82-92.

this in mind, it is certain that she is at pains to image Mrs. Shortley as the spirit of the place, the autochthon, the "giant wife of the countryside," whose vision is one of utter aridity. It is only at the moment of her death, when, at last, she is "displaced in the world from all that belonged to her" that she "seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country" (p. 214). Thus, displacement, divestiture of her earth-mother trappings, is a necessary prelude to the possible discernment of the true country.

The story moves on, then, without her, but her negative force continues to work, her character continues to serve as touchstone, as anti-exemplar for the rest of the tale. After her departure, we hear for the first time about Mrs. McIntyre's first husband, the Judge, on whose place, in whose country, the action of the narrative transpires. Not enough has been said of the Judge in previous criticism of the story. It is the grinning death's-head of the Judge that is the true *deus loci* of the piece, buried there in the family graveyard in the center of the mortgaged farm and bankrupt estate and ravaged timberland that he left his wife. As with Mrs. Shortley, he is carefully imaged in terms of the land, and he is the other primal autochthon of the place: "His teeth and hair were tobacco-colored and his face a clay pink pitted and tracked with mysterious prehistoric-looking marks as if he had been unearthed among fossils" (p. 218). Again, we have obvious earth-figure imagery which—in some writers, in other contexts—might be construed in a positive fashion. An Agrarian reading, for example, of these lines—"The Judge, sunk in the cornfield with his family, was always at home" (p. 218)—might well declare this affirmation, celebration. But O'Connor's text and context will not support such a reading. He is, instead, an extremely unsavory character, who had "a peculiar odor about him of sweaty fondled bills" (p. 218), who was morally and spiritually as well as financially bankrupt, who valued his peacocks only because they made him feel rich, whose only place of worship was in a "closet-like space that was dark and quiet as a chapel" where he kept his desk and his "black mechanical chair" (p. 221). The mode of worship conducted there, the only liturgy performed in that place, was the rather Snopesish business of the Judge: "Old bankbooks and ledgers were stacked in the

half-open drawers and there was a small safe, empty but locked, set like a tabernacle in the center of it" (p. 221). Thus the Judge's tabernacle, empty and locked, tells us all we need to know about the presiding deity of the place. Unlike Mrs. Shortley, he is not displaced, he is there, "sunk" in his cornfield, "grinning under his desecrated monument" (p. 224), which even the stone angel, the "*naked granite cherub*," has deserted (p. 221; emphasis added). (The repetition of "granite," the emphasis on nakedness, even the questionable identity of the angel—is it truly of the order of cherubim or the more earthly cherubs?—all of this fits the pattern of the tale.)

If the Judge is the presiding deity of the place, the principal acolyte is Mrs. McIntyre, who carries on with the empty ceremony of place, managing the farm, paying the taxes, dreaming of being saved by the efficiency of the new hand, the displaced person. All of this is quite explicit; one of her most intense moments occurs when she retreats to the "chapel," the "tabernacle," which has been left just the way the Judge had it, and sits "with her intense constricted face turned toward the empty safe" and thinks "there was nobody poorer in the world than she was" (p. 221). Unfortunately, however, she has not a glimmer of recognition of her spiritual poverty. While Mrs. McIntyre seems not to embody the spirit of the place in the way of Mrs. Shortley and the Judge (e.g., she does not have earth-figure imagery linked with her), she is the guardian, the keeper of that spirit. And it is surely in part her pride of place, in the material sense, that shuts her off from, blinds her to grace. (In this, she is like other O'Connor characters, such as Mrs. Cope in "A Circle in the Fire.") She does not see the peacock for what it is, as the priest does. She detests it and fears the screams in the night, thus associating her with yet another attribute of the peacock in popular lore: that scream is a sure sign of the death of the owner or of someone in the household. Since she is blind to grace, this is all the peacock can mean for her. She does not see Guizac, the displaced person, for what he is. Ironically, she sees him as her salvation, but it is only the material salvation of place that she envisions.

It is necessary and inevitable, then, that she should conspire with the others in the crucifixion of Guizac, a clear Christ-figure

or emblem. Who are these conspirators with Mrs. McIntyre in the death of Guizac? Principally, Mr. Shortley, repeatedly identified as "dead," constantly babbling about place and natives and who belongs where, characteristically—and successfully—preaching his xenophobic drivel to the larger community of the place; he is the true heir to Mrs. Shortley's dark vision. And there is the accomplice, the Negro Sulk, yet another denizen of the place who is precisely figured in terms of the land. When the murderous tractor rolls toward Guizac, Sulk jumps "silently out of the way as if a spring in the earth had released him" (p. 234; emphasis added). At the moment of Guizac's death, the eyes of these three meet "in one look that froze them in collusion forever" (p. 234). With this, the end is near. Mrs. McIntyre feels she is in "some foreign country"; Mr. Shortley leaves; Sulk leaves. Mrs. McIntyre comes down with a nervous affliction. The displacement is complete.

In the end, then, the physical displacement is in congruence with the "theological displacement" which has informed the action from the outset.⁹ But the theological displacement is, in some sense, a direct result of the mode of "placeness" or "place-being" which is under scrutiny in the story. Are we to conclude, as such place-diviners as Lawrence Durrell might, that the "charm" no longer holds good in this particular place?¹⁰ I think

⁹ The phrase "theological displacement" is Caroline Gordon's. Although much commentary on "The Displaced Person" and O'Connor in general deals adequately, sometimes brilliantly, with the notion of "theological displacement," no one has articulated the design suggested here, the relation of sense of place and physical displacement to "theological displacement." The question of the "true country" is, of course, or should be the point of departure for all study of O'Connor. One of the best essays on the subject is one of the earliest: Robert Fitzgerald, "The Countryside and the True Country," *Sewanee Review*, 70 (Summer 1962), 380-394.

¹⁰ Durrell has had a great deal to say about place. In such poems as "Deus Loci," in all of his fiction and travel books, and in his important collection of essays entitled *Spirit of Place*, Durrell tells us that the crucial "determinant of any culture is after all—the spirit of the place." Thus, to read or to write literature truly, or to live fully, we must become "landscape-diviners," we must see that characters are "functions of a landscape"; we must carefully attend to "what the land is saying," we must seek "the mysterious sense of rapport, of identity with the ground," we must connect with the *deus loci*—the spirit of the place. Happily, this takes us beyond a certain Southern provincialism in thinking of place, for Durrell reminds us that the *deus loci* is alive and well in all corners of the world, as he quests for the "enchanted places where the charm

not; rather, we might conclude that the "charm" was never there, or, in what may be O'Connor's deepest sense of the matter, the charm is indeed there and it is the devil's charm, the insidious susurrus of the ancient earth serving as hindrance to grace. This may border on gnostic heresy, but there is clearly no place in O'Connor's vision for natural grace, for redemptive autochthons, all of which she could only regard as fuzzy, sentimental pantheistic nonsense. And yet, this is not to say that she wouldn't agree with Durrell that character is in part at least a function of place. The distinction is that this is a redeeming fact for Durrell, a damning fact for O'Connor.

Finally, it is a moot question whether the stripping of place from Mrs. McIntyre has prepared her for grace, or whether she will slip deeper into the physical numbness she experiences at the end of the tale and the spiritual sloth in which she has been sunk throughout the story. Is she approaching the numinous or ultimate numbness? All that we know is that one of the rare visitors she has on the ravaged, deserted, unworked farm is the priest, who still comes to feed the peacock and explain the doctrines of the Church to her. It is possible to argue that Mrs. McIntyre has approached the necessary preventient condition for grace: divested of material trappings and pride, no longer sunk in place, shocked into an awareness of her collusion in evil, numb with suffering in a "foreign country," she may be ready to comprehend the priest's explanations of doctrine, to enter into a state of grace and her "true country" through the sacraments of the Church, not the sacraments of place. It need hardly be added here that the characters in this story who do have grace are the displaced persons: Guizac, the Pole, and his family, and Father Flynn.

To recapitulate, then, the Southern shibboleth of place gets rather rough treatment in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. There are characters, such as Mrs. Shortley and the Judge, who are imaged as the very incarnation of place—a condition to be admired in

still holds good" (*Spirit of Place*, pp. 156-163). Durrell's sense of place is akin to—and perhaps more acute than—most Southern writers' sense of the matter, yet quite the opposite of O'Connor's. Indeed her characters listen too much to "what the land is saying," have too much "identity with the ground."

most Southern fiction—who in fact epitomize for O'Connor all that is blind, proud, slothful and willfully shut off from the true country of the spirit. Far from projecting an aura of redemption or even a hint of salvific force, the place-imbued autochthons in O'Connor are seen as sunk in nature and spiritual torpor, exemplars of the devil, far gone in accidie or false prophecy. If they are to enter or even to glimpse the true country they must first suffer displacement, physical and theological. Indeed, we have all too often, perhaps, framed the wrong equation for the world of O'Connor's fiction: could it be that the countryside is hell, rather than Atlanta or New York, to name just two of the urban "non-places" against which O'Connor characters (and readers) frequently direct their topophobia? Isn't it rather that New York, and the other lunatic, godless "no-place" (in O'Connor's phrase) cities of her fiction amount to a kind of Purgatory, the required displacement in the rite of passage to grace? If one's visa for the true country is to be deemed valid, O'Connor tells us eloquently in "*The Displaced Person*," one's passport must bear a clear record of utter displacement.

